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## *Escaped Alone*—Dark Imagination

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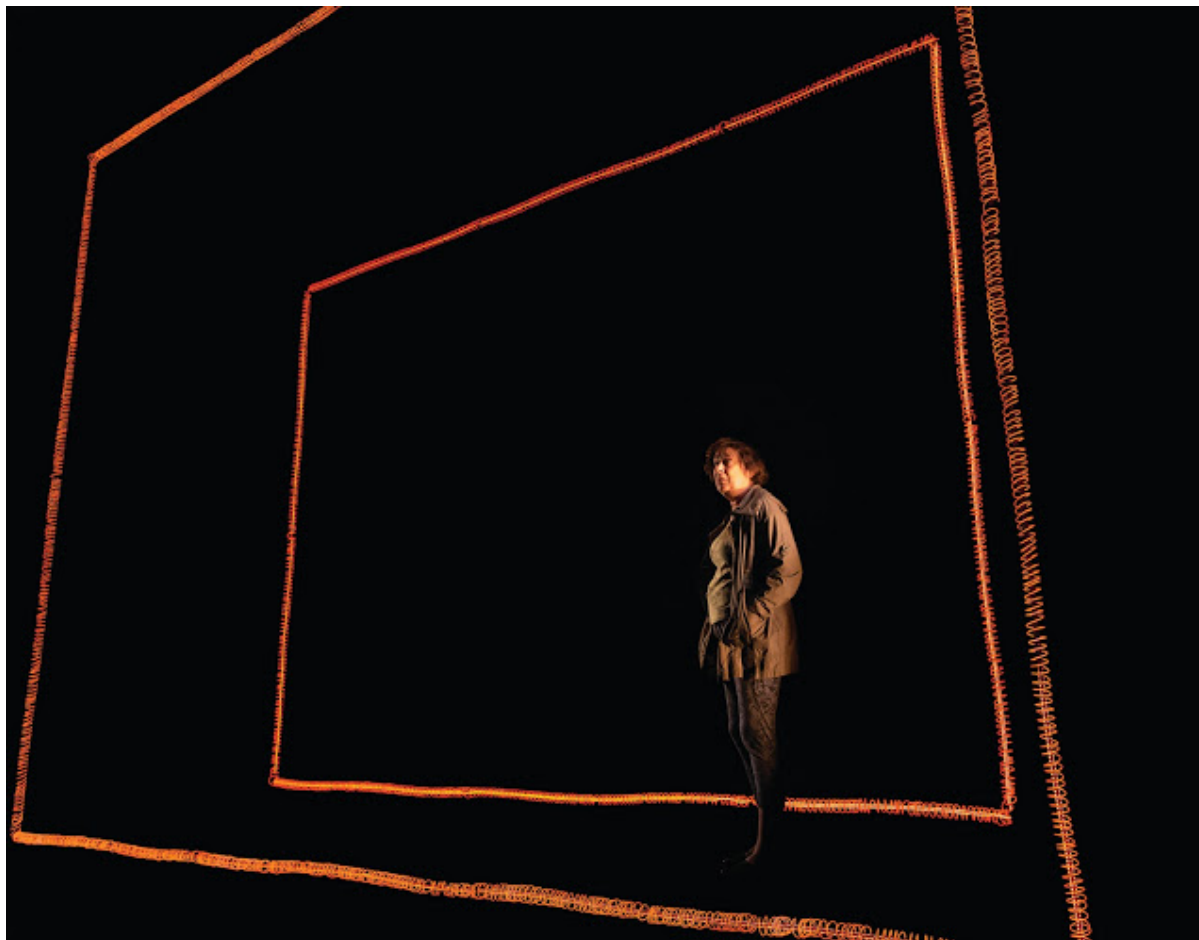
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In Context: *Silent Voices*

*Silent Voices*—Composers' Notes



Linda Bassett. Photo: Johan Persson

By Rob Weinert-Kendt

"And I only am escaped alone to tell thee," a line from the Book of Job that Melville used to begin his epilogue to *Moby-Dick*, hovers questioningly over Caryl Churchill's new play *Escaped Alone*, which opened a year ago at London's Royal Court Theatre and [comes to BAM's Harvey Theater from February 15 to 26](#). Does Churchill's title refer to Mrs. Jarrett, played by Linda Bassett, who for roughly half the play's 50-minute running time stands in abstractly framed darkness downstage, coolly describing a series of ecological and social disasters that only she seems to have lived to tell about?

According to the play's director, James Macdonald, the title may also suggest a more general state of being and nothingness among a quartet of women, including Mrs. Jarrett, who are seen in the play's other half chatting amiably, if often at cross purposes, in a sunny backyard.

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"It seems to reference in some ways the private catastrophes the women have had," says Macdonald, a frequent Churchill collaborator, who last turned up in New York to direct the Atlantic Theater's revival of her *Cloud Nine* in 2015. "You can take huge solace in friendship and conversation, but in the end you are still alone."

That bleak takeaway is hardly atypical of Churchill's uncompromising work, from the feminist fable *Top Girls* to the speculative science fiction of *A Number*. At the center of all her plays, Macdonald says, is the question of "how we construct who we are." In the case of the four women in *Escaped Alone*, their identities have been socially constructed: All have had a husband and a child, though details are not always forthcoming and memory ultimately unreliable. There was a murder, quite possibly an infidelity, though the worst of the women's troubles seem to center on more intimate, solitary doubts and fears—the "private catastrophes" Macdonald refers to.

Then there is the catalogue of terrors described by Mrs. Jarrett, which go well beyond familiar eco-apocalypse scenarios "into a place that's half-satirical, half-horror," as Macdonald puts it. Whole populations have been driven into underground tunnels; the dwindling food supply has been allocated entirely to television programs watched enviously by starving commuters "on their iPlayers"; and, as in the conclusion of Churchill's eerily prescient 2000 play *Far Away*, animals and nature are in revolt, in unpredictable, unsettling ways unimagined even by the Bible. The absurdism may suggest Ionesco, but Macdonald cites another relevant inspiration.

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Linda Bassett, Deborah Findlay, Kika Markham, June Watson. Photo: Johan Persson

"I always think a very useful thing to hang on to with Caryl, and it applies with this play, is that her dad was a cartoonist," says Macdonald. He means not so much Churchill's gift for creating stage pictures as what he calls her "sort of diagrammatic imagination. She can write elliptically; she can write something short, and encapsulate something in an image." Though, he adds, "She does do rather brilliant cartoons from time to time, little drawings, I was amazed to discover."

These tantalizing glimpses into Churchill's process are few and far between, as she doesn't give interviews herself. Macdonald, though, is quick to dispel any mystique about a woman routinely identified as the world's greatest living English-language playwright.

"It would be hard to direct her work with freedom and playfulness if you were over-reverential," he says. Though he notes that her plays "generally arrive perfectly formed," she "would be the first person to see if something isn't working, and she'll change things. Though usually just a line."

Or half a line. "Part of the fun of this kind of writing is that Caryl isn't finishing all the lines and beats,"

says Macdonald. As with Pinter or Mamet, playwrights known for ellipses, pauses, and false starts in their dialogue, with Churchill it's crucial to "know what you were going to say when you've only said half a line," says Macdonald. "That's part of the work in rehearsal, to create the detailed world that lives behind the text and gives it life."

Along these lines, Macdonald and the four actors—all of whom are coming to the BAM production directly from the Royal Court—also browsed a book of "100 greatest catastrophes" for inspiration. But all this work, Macdonald points out, remains under the surface—in much the same way, of course, the myriad internal things we do to construct ourselves largely remain occluded.

"If there's a trick to doing Caryl's work, it's deciding what information you need and what you don't," says Macdonald.

Escaped Alone *comes to the BAM Harvey Theater February 15–26, and great tickets are still available.*

*Rob Weinert-Kendt is the editor-in-chief of American Theatre magazine.*

Posted by Susan at 11:49 AM

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